



The City's Treasures

Arms and Armor in the Metropolitan Museum of Art

By Louis Lee Arms

ONE can better understand the boldness of the knights of old after a little journey through the arms and armor department of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.



Japanese armor, fourteenth century

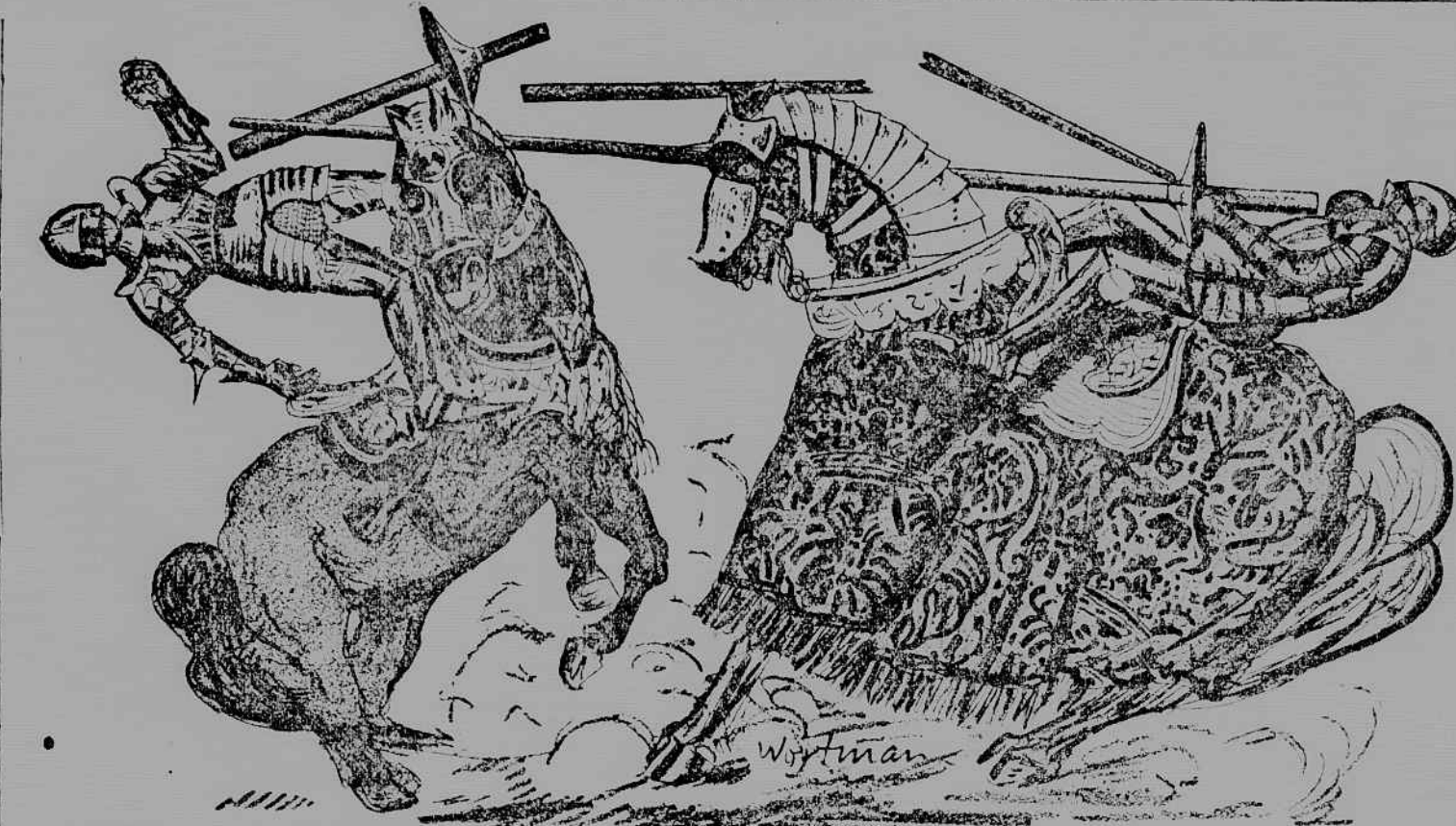
"Jenkins," says the knight of 1460, do my basinet and and visor recommend themselves?" "Yes, m' lord." "And my armor coat? Is there a wrinkle about the neck?" "No, m' lord." "How about the chain mail below the waist?" "Perfect, m' lord." "And the knee guards and greaves? I shall not trip on them?" "No, m' lord." "Jenkins, aren't there about two fingers left in that bottle of Scotch?" "There were, sire." "Pour it, Jenkins. . . Now I'll be going." So saying, the armored knight fares forth to the tournament. He is emboldened by the sense of his impenetrability. It may be that during the course of the afternoon he will break a lance and be thrust from his fiery steed by the cunning of an antagonist, but unless he is all out of luck he will escape serious injury. Only a pneumatic steel drill could accomplish that.

Yes, the knight of old was bold. He was, in addition, as imposing in appearance as he was intrepid of heart. Going forth to give battle—

styles came in to thwart the lethal intent, and until the eighteenth century the competition was even. By that time armor suits had grown so heavy that the average knight cast them aside in the heat of battle. No doubt he felt that whatever happened he could not possibly be worse off than when weighted down and encased in steel pantaloons, an armor jacket and a casque which had an aggregate weight of one hundred pounds.

It was said that the weight of such a suit grew with each passing hour, until in the midst of a brisk engagement the armor was averaging about forty ounces to each of the one hundred pounds, and the valiant knight was often led to the suspicion that in an unguarded moment some one had placed a grand piano on his back. For that reason, and because he found breathing raised to the level of science under the conditions, he shed his suicidal vestments and came out into the open.

"In this regard I recall an incident which is so much to the point that I am tempted to tell it," says Dr. Bashford Dean, curator of the arms and armor collection. "During the Second Empire a distinguished collector of armor appeared at the Goupil hall in a complete suit of sixteenth century armor. It fitted him admirably, and he wore under it a copy of the clothing which would have originally accompanied it; in a word, his physical envelopes were accurately 'of the period.' Therefore, if armor were worn with moderate



Two olden knights in a medieval tilt. An adaptation, from an old wood cut

forged iron obtained from a collection of ancient armor, said to be Gothic, from the garrets of the royal palace at Munich.

While the neglect of these ancient harnesses has diminished the collector's field it has whetted his appreciation for that which has been preserved. In earlier times the manufacture of armor and arms was a calling patronized by kings and their courts. A great swordsmith, Serafino di Brescia, was accepted by such an art lover as Francis I as equal in rank to Titian. The Negroli were ennobled, fortune and fame came to the Colman family through the Austrian emperors and "the imperial Maximilian is pictured in his workshop with his hand upon the shoulder of the master-armorers Seusenhofer." It may be that he was instructing Seusenhofer to take a little of the steel padding out of his shoulders and lessen the load.

Raphael and Michael Angelo studied the art, as did Dürer, Leonardo and Cellini, who executed shields and hilts of rapiers and poignards. Then there were Titian, Gian Bologna, Giulio Romano, Holbein, Peter Vischer and Donatello, all of whom were led to the study of armor because of its artistic beauty.

In expatiating upon the difficulties of the art Dr. Dean writes: "Its processes were varied and a knowledge of them was often guarded jealously, as a heritage of artist families or of ancient guilds. Its implements were things apart, with scores of curiously shaped hammers and anvils, and with a formidable battery of eccentric pincers, files, saws and vises—objects which their owners sometimes elaborately ornamented, incised and sculptured."

"There are, in fact, few copyists to-day who would attempt a real armor's task. And modern work has ever in it a hardness of line. Persuade an artist to copy, for example, the comb of a morion. This is the crest or ridge encircling

the top of a somewhat hat-shaped headpiece, which the old armorers would develop out of a single piece of metal to a height of six inches, and at the same time leave the maximum strength at the top of the crest where it was needed. If the modern copyist attempted such a task his result would be lacking in finished symmetry or in the graduation in the thickness of the metal in the exposed parts. The only artist who might become a dangerous faussaire is the one who would be willing to copy the same object scores of times."

Rich Collection

The Egyptian, Cretan, European and Oriental exhibitions of arms and armor are those that may be seen. To the eye there is considerable sameness in the exhibition. That is probably so because there is so much of arms and armor to fill the eye, there being 2,900 European and 1,600 Japanese pieces, not counting the additional Oriental or the Egyptian and Cretan devices that are to be found elsewhere in the museum.

It is certain that the warriors of different European nations vied with one another in the style and effectiveness of their metal garments. The complete Gothic armor, Italian, of the 1450 period differs widely from the German suit of 1425. One is made of steel sheets hammered into masculine contour, the other of chain mail that has a certain resemblance to a porous underwear that is often discussed in the remote pages of our popular magazines.

There is a stiff, ready-to-wear look about the Italian get-up that

ceedingly broad of shoulder and about 2.75 of waist.

It is this inevitable breadth of shoulder and slenderness of waist which leads to the assumption that if the average tired business man of the present day were charged with entering a coat of mail he would, as a matter of necessity, draw it on in such a manner as to wear the shoulders about his stomach, while tucking the waist firmly up under his chin.

Not until recently did the Metropolitan Museum put in place its choicest piece of armor. The original ownership of this war trappings is ascribed to Sieur Jacques Gourdon de Genoulhae, said to be a courtier and warrior of the court of Louis XII and Francis I. Sieur Jacques was a master of artillery and a great figure of a man.

The museum obtained this suit in 1914 from the descendants of Sieur Jacques, but owing to the subsea menace it was thought unwise to ship it to New York. Thus it arrived only recently, bearing on several of its antique parts the date 1527. The armor has been in the keeping of William H. Riggs, whose distinguished collection already is on exhibition at the museum. When

sueded to enter the ancient harness, but he did not fill it. There were inches to spare about the chest and shoulders. The attendant stood up alone under the armor long enough to be photographed, then resumed his seat.

Now that the figure is mounted on a full panoplied charger at the entrance of the museum, it is most imposing. In his mailed fist the effigy of the knight carries a mighty lance. The horse is suitably covered by a brocade blanket or robe which gives rather a chaise-longue effect. One is convinced, that with a reading lamp placed on the charging arching neck and a five-foot bookshelf somewhere alongside, the knight could spend many a pleasant winter's evening in his new quarters.

A basinet which may have been worn by Joan of Arc is on ex-



Early armor plate, 1401

hibition in the European display. The label accompanying it says: "This basinet is said to have hung above the main altar of the Church of Saint-Pierre du Martroi at Orleans, where it was long known as 'the casque of Joan of Arc.' It bears marks of service (more injuries caused by arrows or bolts), and was evidently an ex voto. It is of French workmanship, and from its date (1400), may have been worn by the Maid of Orleans, but there is no documentary evidence confirming this."

Ivory war and hunting horns show a rare quality of workmanship and are among the most interesting of the smaller exhibitions. In this class come saddles and spurs. While the spurs were designed with undoubted punishing capacity, in this respect they would seem to only slightly excel the saddles. A German saddle of the fourteenth century, veneered with plates of bone,

is retained in a glass case in a state of open defiance. It is evident that in the olden days the knight had to conquer both the horse and the saddle before he could appear in public with that calm insouciance which so well befits storied knight-hood.

Dispelling a Paradox

If the bone saddle seems to be an evidence of a sporting spirit on the part of the German fifteenth century this paradox is dispelled by the exhibition of a cap of closely wound rope which the Teuton wore under his helmet. After first pulling this rope cap tightly over his scone he superimposed his iron hat, thus gaining the same advantage that is to be observed in his coat of chain mail. The Englishman's coat of chain mail was constructed of very porous chain, something like 0000000, but when the German built his he did it 0000000.

The Englishman of the fourteenth century, with his knee guards and greaves covered with linen or velvet and his arm guards and armor gloves, was everything that a gentleman should be. He wore a plate boot excessively pointed at the toe, and his progress, we trust, was not marred by a series of trips.

The Merovingian arms of the fourth to seventh centuries, including swords, axe heads, shields and spear points brought up from the bottom of the Seine, are a quaint collection of weapons made from minerals. They appear to be more primitive even than the Egyptian collection of an older day.

The tournament book of the Emperor Maximilian I of Austria, 1502, has one print which shows a small segment of a medieval battlefield. All is intense confusion, all that is, except a figure who is supposedly the Emperor. He stands a little apart from the mob of fleeing



Plate armor, 1421

warriors and phrenetic horses, with an air of detachment that seems hardly justified by the circumstances. As a matter of fact, some fleeing warrior has hoisted a lance at the Emperor which has missed the royal mazzard by a matter of inches. But he does not dodge. He does not flinch. He stands there with his arms folded over his breast after the manner of a Western stump speaker. It seems rather remarkable that an Emperor was not more often crowned on the battlefield as well as in public life.

A breech loading cannon used in 1500 was upturned by a dredge near Seville. There are also a perrier or bombard of the late fourteenth century and a falconet of the fifteenth century discovered in a Cumberland swamp. Stone cannon balls were projected from these primitive firearms, although the French had an incendiary cannon ball made of steel and looking for all the world like a miniature birdcage.

Preceding the Tin Hat

Plate guards and iron hats of the olden days were the forerunners of the celebrated "tin hats" of the modern trench. The museum has a comprehensive and interesting collection used in the late war that is startling

in its similarity to the head and face armor of hundreds of years ago. Among these is a Belgian experimental helmet which will resist an alloy jacketed bullet of 230 grains traveling at the rate of 650 feet a second. This helmet weighs forty-four ounces and is made of 12 per cent manganese steel.

An American manganese alloy helmet which was turned out in the late war will stop an automatic copper jacketed ball weighing 230 grains and traveling 500 feet a second. Dr. Dean, who held the rank of major during the war, experimented widely in helmets and steel jackets and conferred with General Pershing in France on their feasibility as regular equipment. The hospital records show that three-fourths of the men killed or injured from 1914 to 1918 might have been spared had they been afforded the protection to be had from a modern armor suit.

Possibly the most exquisite antique in the entire arms and armor collection is a steel casque executed by Philip de Negroli. It is said that this headgear would bring in the open market now a sum of \$250,000. It was turned over to the museum by Mr. J. P. Morgan in 1917. The label attached to the casque says: "Casque in the antique style ex-



Complete chain mail, thirteenth century

cut by the Milanese armorers, Philip de Negroli (1410-1507), who prepared similar pieces for the Emperor Charles V and Philip II of Spain. The present casque, signed by the artist and dated 1543, is more elaborate than the others. It may have been made for Francis I."

Other royal armor includes the burgher of Henry II of France and the arms of Louis XIII. Here the art of the armorer reached the highwater mark, and in the design there is a fluidity and beauty of movement that represents all that is best in this painstaking work.

Siege of Jerusalem

But in the plethora of royal arms, Italian hunting swords, Saxon foils, German swords and sheaths and Italian blades we should not overlook a Burgundian tapestry which hangs against the east wall. It carries the legend, "The Siege of Jerusalem," and was executed in the fifteenth century.

This siege as worked into silk occupies a space some twenty feet high and thirty feet long. The artist spared no pains to work everybody in Jerusalem into the picture. The streets are crowded with the besieged, who seem to be giving one another the elbow as practiced in a modern subway, in their attempt to reach the exact center of town, where a few prisoners of war are being slaugh-

and to take whatever came his way—he was a fine figure of a man. How far he traveled to enter the lists his chroniclers do not say, but there is every reason to believe that with a spare tire hitched on behind and an auxiliary gas tank depending from his shoulders he could put past him vast distances.

The Suet Impulse

The introduction of armor for fighting and mock battle is a normal development. Man is endowed with a primal impulse to swat at something, a baseball or the office cat, for example; but he has always strongly objected to being swatted in return. Since he could not overcome his desire to take an occasional crack at his neighbor it was necessary that he prepare to receive what he so buoyantly gaveth, and out of this necessity grew armor. It grew and grew, even flourished, you might say, until by 1890 man had built up a chain mail first line of defense that turned back spears, war axes and lance heads with equal effectiveness.

Fast as new weapons were devised, guaranteed to separate a gentleman from his head, new armor

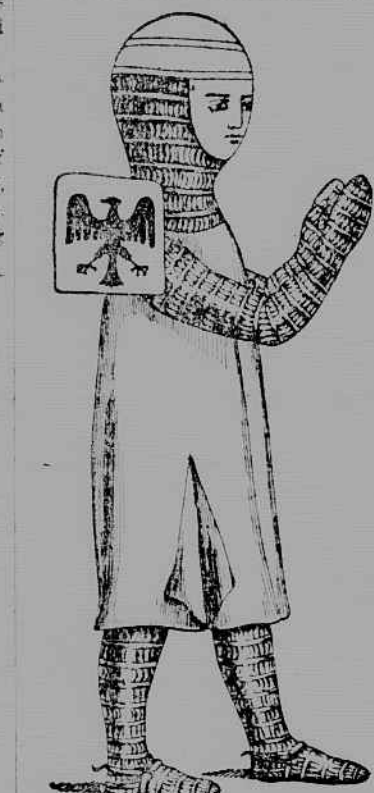
comfort it should have been demonstrated in this case, especially since the wearer was then in his prime and in good training. Nevertheless, the armor proved more than burdensome; it seemed to gain steadily in weight as the night wore on, and the difficulty in breathing in a closed helmet became ever greater. To add to his distress the wearer found at a critical moment that he could not raise his visor—something had gone wrong with the ancient spring clasp—and he probably would have been overcome had not a good friend come to his rescue."

Armor Is Scarce

But the objects of the armorers are, after all, exhibited at the Metropolitan Museum not because of their relation to war but to art. There are so few exhibitions in this country of arms and armor that their bearing upon the life of their contemporaries is not readily understood. With the constant improvement in firearms, armor went out of date and lost its dignity. In many cases it was destroyed, lost or utilized, as in the case of the gate of the botanical gardens at Munich, which was made early in the last century of



Von Schwarzburg Armor, 1350



Banded mail with shoulder shield, 1274

is in sharp contrast to the informality of the German garment which carries the skirt effect that has been widely popularized on the California beaches. Which is the better we do not presume to know, nor do the labels tell. Both are ex-



Gothic armor, about 1435

the German long-range guns began playing on Paris Mr. Riggs removed the armor to Bordeaux, whence it came to America. Now it is safely at the museum and occupies for the present a place of honor to the right of the main entrance.

A Giant

Whatever conjecture is mixed with the history of this armor suit in no wise affects the proposition that the man who wore it was a giant in figure. The largest attendant at the museum, a man who stands well over six feet, was per-